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ABSTRACT

This study examined differences in the manifestation of learning disabilities (LD) between minority and non-minority students at a southeastern public college. Profiles of non-minority and minority college students not previously identified as learning disabled and with a history of academic difficulty were compared. Among trends noted in both groups included flat profiles showing little discrepancy between verbal and performance intelligence test scores and a 50% incidence of females, higher than usually found in LD populations. Trend differences between minority and non-minority groups included: age (minority students tended to be older); attendance at multiple postsecondary institutions (50% of minority students but only 17% of non-minority students had attended a previous institution); sex (33% of non-minority students and 66% of minority students were female); and reason for evaluation (more minority students (66%) sought evaluation based on multiple failures on the Regents Tests as opposed to problems in the classroom setting, while for non-minority students the percentages were reversed). Includes four references. (DB)

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Issues in the Identification of Minority College Students with Learning Disabilities

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Issues in the Identification of Minority College Students with Learning Disabilities

The field of learning disabilities has raised many questions, especially in the area of characteristics and identification of college students with learning disabilities (LD). Related issues and questions concern whether or not there are differences in the manifestation of learning disabilities in minority college students with learning disabilities, and whether or not these differences can be identified through a typical psychometric test battery such as the WAIS-R, PPVT-R, WRAT-R, and WJPEB.

PURPOSE

Data was collected in a public, Southeastern college, and profiles of minority and non-minority students were compared. In our work with a small number of minority students identified as learning disabled, the expected profile indicating a discrepancy between cognitive ability and achievement was not always readily detected. As the current state of research indicates (e.g., Johnson & Blalock, 1987; Kavale, 1987) there are many unresolved issues concerning the use of severe discrepancy as a criterion for identification, especially in cases where overt performances of learning disabled students may be similar to nonlearning disabled students. Because the students in this group presented "flat" profiles, maintained an adequate Grade Performance Average (GPA), yet had difficulty in passing the university system requirement of the Regents' Tests in Reading and Writing, more differentiated testing was needed. Many of these students seemed to be performance oriented, choosing majors such as Recreation, Physical

Education choosing majors such as Recreation, Physical Education or areas in Industrial Technology, but had problems with the cognitive skills involved in the reading and writing of content areas and/or the Regents Tests. Successful completion of the Regents Tests is required for graduation. Students may take the Regents Test after completing the first two English requirements, and must take them after earning 60 hours on a quarter system.

One of our goals is to show the need for more differentiated evaluations to identify the underlying patterns of strengths and weaknesses in terms of information processing for adults with LD. Another goal is to share information about possible emerging trends with other professionals. The information includes shared characteristics of minority and non-minority students with learning disabilities, such as motivation, reliability, persistence, and responsibility.

METHOD

Subject Selection

The students in this study were selected based on the following criteria:

- met regular admissions standards
- GPA of $\geq$2.0
- not previously identified
- tested within an eighteen-month period

- self-referred, or by faculty for academic difficulty or multiple failures on the Regents Tests
- met exclusionary clauses for LD definition
- scored within average range on WAIS-R

Student Profiles

The traditional criterion of a discrepancy between the Verbal and Performance Standard Scores on the WAIS-R was often not evident, nor were the discrepancies evident in standardized achievement test results. On closer inspection, these students demonstrated their potential for college work (meeting regular admission criteria, and maintaining adequate GPAs), yet had significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities, as manifested in multiple failures in classroom work or on the Regents Tests or on standardized test results.

Students evaluated because of academic difficulties tended to identify problems such as spelling, writing, or stated that it took undue amounts of time to read and complete required work. These students were usually in the younger age range, Freshmen or Sophomores, and had not attended any other post-secondary institution. They were most often referred for testing by their professors. The difficulties experienced were usually in a specific course such as English composition, and less frequently in courses requiring heavy reading such as history or sociology.

Students evaluated because of multiple failures with the Regents Tests, generally passed one of the two areas (Reading and Essay). Regents Tests can be taken only once per quarter. After the first failure, the students enroll in a remedial course, if they have earned 75 hours of credit toward the 195-200 hours needed for graduation.

Students evaluated because of failure on the Regents averaged five attempts, and enrollment in remedial courses at least four times. Thus it appears that typical remedial courses are not effective for this group of students, perhaps another indicator that these students may be classified as LD.

The students in this sample included males and females, blacks and whites, transfers and students who have attended only this institution. Ages ranged from 18-30 years. An interesting fact about this group is that 50% were female, as contrasted with school-age populations in which about 75% are male (Lerner, 1985).

Assessment Procedures

All students who sought evaluations completed an application for evaluation which included current academic data, description and history of problems experienced, and reason for assessment request. Typical assessment battery for this sample included the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scales-Revised (WAIS-R), the Bender Gestalt, and achievement and other diagnostic tests, selection based on presenting problem. These tests generally included the achievement section of the

Woodcock-Johnson Psychoeducational Battery (WJPEB), the College Board Descriptive Tests of Language Skills (DTLS), and a reading test (Stanford Diagnostic). Because this battery was not sufficient to identify and diagnose discrepant patterns, the cognitive section of the WJPEB was added in an effort to clarify specific LD. The cognitive section corroborated student strengths and weaknesses in processing information.

DISCUSSION

Each of the trends noted in the students seeking evaluation are presented briefly below. Among the adult population in general two trends were noted: the frequent flat profile, and the high percentage of females. The flat profiles made it difficult to identify adult students as LD and raised questions about available resources for assessment and the need to identify other indices of LD for this population. Trend differences between minority and non-minority students included age, number of post-secondary institutions attended and reason for evaluation. Age as a factor reinforces the notion that some LD students continue to pursue an education in spite of difficulties caused by their specific LD. Attendance at multiple post-secondary institutions, influence of cultural differences on test performance and differences in reasons for seeking evaluation are briefly presented.

Flat profiles. The typical discrepant profile sought in the identification of children, was often not evident on the WAIS-R with these young adults. Sixty-six percent of the students had Verbal-Performance differences of less than 15 points, with 6 points being the average difference. Severe discrepancies were not evident in the scores. Efforts to verify the existence of a specific learning disability were made by looking for discrepancies in achievement and potential, and for underlying processing deficits, based on subtest scores of the WAIS-R, WJPEB, DTLS, timed and untimed reading tasks.

More extensive evaluation sometimes provided the opportunity to determine that a student had a specific disability. But, at other times, it was difficult to determine whether or not they had a specific disability or were over-achievers. Factors that confounded identification were: no previous identification and, therefore, pervasive effect of the unidentified disability (these students had learned some compensatory strategies); and limitations of tests for adults. In the case of minority students another confounding variable was the possible influence of cultural differences that may have deflated their general scores. It has been reported that blacks tend to score on the average 15 points below whites on typical intelligence tests (Woolfolk, 1987). The mean full scale WAIS-R for minority students in this study was 86 - for majority was 101. Of the minority students, 84% were black.

Age differences. Although the age range tended to be about the same for both minority and non-minority groups, minority students tended to be older.

Attendance at multiple postsecondary institutions. Fifty percent of the minority students had attended a previous institution as opposed to seventeen percent of the majority students.

Sex. Thirty-three percent of the non-minority students were female while 66% of the minority students were females. Of the total group it is interesting to note that 50% were females, a higher percentage than is usually found in LD students identified prior to enrollment at post-secondary institutions.

Reason for evaluation. A higher percentage of minority students sought evaluation based on multiple failures on the Regents Tests (66%) as opposed to problems in the classroom setting. For non-minority students the percentages were reversed. Since our institution is a majority institution, this may reflect a hesitancy to seek assistance or lack of knowledge among minority students enrolled. However, it also suggests that these students experience fewer debilitating problems in the classroom.

SUMMARY

The above trends, although notable, are based on a small number of students. We do believe that previously unidentified students may

present different profiles, and problems, than are usually found in school-age populations.

As a result of our work with these students, we are continually looking for better methods of assessment and for other trends that might apply to this particular population.

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